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SUBJECT: LOBBYING FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS SAUDI-STYLE: SPECIAL
REPRESENTATIVE FARAH PANDITH'S MEETING AT THE JEDDAH
BUSINESSWOMEN'S CENTER

REF: A. JEDDAH 445

[1](#)B. 06 JEDDAH 446

[1](#)C. RIYADH 1532

[1](#)D. RIYADH 1278

[1](#)E. JEDDAH 424

[1](#)F. JEDDAH 342

[1](#)G. JEDDAH 047

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Classified By: Consul General Martin R. Quinn for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. As part of her October 31-November 1 visit to Saudi Arabia (ref A), Special Representative to Muslim Communities Farah Pandith met with Basmah Omair, general manager of the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry's (JCCI) Khadeejah Bint Khuwailed Women's Center (KBKC). The KBKC and JCCI have led the push in Saudi Arabia to remove obstacles to women's participation in the economy. Omair attributed the KBKC's success to strong royal and business support and a practical, non-aggressive, locally appropriate approach to lobbying for change -- and avoiding politics and links with foreigners. Omair praised the King and his opening of the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), but was less enthusiastic about a women's university intended to open new academic fields to Saudi women. End Summary.

What do Saudi women want?

[1](#)2. (C) During her first trip to Saudi Arabia, Special Representative Farah Pandith was invited to the Businesswomen's Center at the Jeddah chamber, which has led the Kingdom in promoting women's economic rights, including the right to work alongside men, invest in non-traditional fields like construction, and serve on company boards. KBKC director Basmah Omair (for background see ref B) told Pandith that Saudi women want choices and opportunities beyond education and nursing, which -- as in the US during the 1950s-60s -- are traditionally the only fields open to Saudi women.

[1](#)3. (C) The KBKC, with support from the government and local businessmen, was established in 2004. Among the goals then, Omair recalled, were having women members on the Shura Council and Council of Ministers. Today Saudi Arabia has a female deputy minister (for education), women advisors to the Shura Council, and a female deputy minister at the Jeddah Municipal Council, she noted proudly. The Jeddah court

system has requested the KBKC's help with establishing a women's section and identifying better policies and procedures for dealing with women. In order to see how women are treated by the court system, Omair told us she recently went undercover pretending to request a divorce.

Lobbying for women's economic rights . . .

14. (SBU) The center originally trained women to start and run businesses. But after realizing that these women were being prevented by laws and customs from participating in the economy, the KBKC switched focus to lobbying against those restrictions. Among its achievements, the KBKC persuaded the government to officially declare in writing that women and men may work together without violating prohibitions on genders "mixing", and distributed copies of this statement to businesses to post in their establishments to support hiring women.

15. (SBU) The KBKC has recently begun looking for ways to support women working from home. Originally the KBKC didn't push the concept of working from home, fearing that women would be kept at home. But telecommuting is now a focus because there is no day care, no public transportation, and women can't drive, and so spend most of their salaries paying for transportation and (male) drivers' salaries. The problem, according to Omair, is that Saudi managers do not know how to manage workers remotely and so are reluctant to allow working from home. The KBKC is looking for a US company to advise them on how it can be done.

. . . by playing it politically correct

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16. (C) Omair noted that lobbying in Saudi Arabia is very different from lobbying in the United States. The KBKC targets key players, and enjoys strong support from King Abdullah and many leading officials and businessmen. Because of this royal support "nobody bothers us" and the opposition "looks the other way." She and other women's rights advocates at the JCCI approach issues from a local perspective using local ideology to give a "local sense of change". In establishing the KBKC they deliberately chose an Islamic role model, Khadeejah Bint Khuwailed -- the wife of the prophet Mohammed who was also a successful businesswoman, religious scholar, and mother -- so conservative fears of a western women's movement would die. Omair, who spent decades in Washington, DC during her father's Saudi Embassy assignment, commented that as a westernized Arab she had to learn to talk the local language. She and her colleagues are careful not to appear aggressive, and never approach decisionmakers with just complaints; they go with proposed solutions and present common sense arguments. In lobbying against the ban on female clerks, for example, the KBKC staged photos of married couples at a store purchasing from both women and male shop clerks to illustrate there was no prohibited "mixing" occurring. "We have to play it politically correct. It's all about how you present it," Omair concluded.

The pace of change

17. (C) Asked by Pandith if the pace of change is fast enough, Omair said sometimes it is, sometimes it is not depending on the issues. Saudi Arabia is at tip of change with more to come. Sometimes she feels frustrated, Omair acknowledged, when she considers that the year is 2009 and that the 1970s were more open.

How can the US support Muslims respectfully?

¶18. (C) In response to Pandith's question about how the United States can be supportive and helpful without appearing to be pushing something on Muslims, Omair suggested working with local people and organizations to find out what is needed and would add the greatest value. For example, four years ago the British consulate did a program on elections at the JCCI, but the JCCI wasn't ready for it. The US can support research, organizational experiences, develop hands-on programs, and connect organizations. Omair cautioned that linkage with the US could compromise local activists, referencing several Kuwait ladies who went to the United States on a program and "lost the election because they were seen as working for the Americans. Americans thought they were supporting women; Arabs though they were bringing in western ideology."

¶19. (C) Pandith took time to talk about the new frame and foundation of engagement articulated by the President and the Secretary. Her job is to reach out to the next generation and build long-term partnerships and relationships. Omair agreed with the idea of working on projects together as humans, observing that everyone wants the same thing for their kids, such as health and education. She also suggested programs involving Saudis who have studied overseas would be a good starting point. Over the past two to three years 80,000 Saudi students have traveled overseas for education. When they return "the older generation won't be able to hold them in."

No politics, please

¶10. (C) Reacting to suggestions of possible partnerships, Omair stated flatly that she and other JCCI activists are "not willing to risk what we've achieved with government and business." The KBKC is "not affiliated with any international organization" and deliberately avoids politics. "We're picky about who we work with because some women are very aggressive." In terms of the idea of building a network of businesswomen in the Middle East, "We know of each other," Omair replied, adding that the Yemeni Chamber of Commerce

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visited the KBKC last week and the Kuwaiti women are too aggressive. Omair was reluctant to work with groups like the Muslim women's leadership network at Wellesley College's Center for Women saying it has ladies who "are really political." "My target audience is men."

¶11. (U) The KBKC is working with the World Bank and the International Finance Corporation (IFC) to research obstacles and opportunities for businesswomen in Saudi Arabia. The JCCI approached the organizations after reading their report on women's entrepreneurship in other countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. "It's best to use a study that has been done for other countries."

Representing Saudi Arabia abroad:

"We won't be window dressing"

¶12. (C) Omair mentioned that she and other women at the JCCI get requests all the time to join all sorts of delegations to represent Saudi Arabia overseas -- largely because there are no Saudi women in many sectors. They only accept meaningful assignments. "We won't be window dressing." Omair acknowledged that Saudi agencies are hesitant to send out women, and that sometimes those chosen for overseas delegations are not the most qualified. "A couple years back

we suggested some names to attend a human rights meeting in Geneva. Those women that went were not good. Some facts (about conditions in Saudi Arabia) nobody can deny."

Engaging media carefully -- getting on Oprah

¶13. (SBU) Pandith observed that there are stereotypes about Saudi Arabia and that perhaps by connecting Saudi and western media organizations to the next generation, a new reality could be created. Asked by Pandith if she would be interested in introductions to journalists, Omair described a bad experience with BBC. The KBKC put together a group of intellectual Saudi women to discuss conditions, and the only clip BBC used was "we're happy the way we are." Worried about inaccurate edits, Omair now prefers to go live. Omair and her colleagues have been trying to get on Oprah. "We have a good story to tell."

Saudi education: KAUST - "breaking all the rules"

¶14. (C) Pandith, who had just visited the new King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), asked Omair about the thinking behind the creation of KAUST. Saudi Arabia chose a different model from other Gulf states by building KAUST from scratch, rather than bringing in a foreign university franchise as other GCC countries have done. Omair lauded the king, saying his approach was better because that way it seems like change is coming from within -- change had to be local. KAUST is an expression of the King's personal vision, she continued. "He's a reformist. He believes in education and the subjects at KAUST are related to Saudi Arabia's needs. He broke all the rules in establishing KAUST." (For more on KAUST see refs C,D,E,F,G.)

and a new women's university -- mediocre despite the monorail

¶15. (C) Omair was less enthusiastic about the giant new university being built for women outside Riyadh (Princess Nora Bint Abdulrahman University for Girls), despite modern facilities including a monorail. Headed by a member of the royal family, the Princess Nora University is designed to allow more than 30,000 Saudi women to study previously unavailable fields. Omair commented that Saudi girls and women need dynamic teachers, and a women's college must have an excellent faculty in order to be competitive with men's institutions. Currently, there are no Saudi women qualified to manage the university, and it is unlikely to attract the best and the brightest from overseas, as with KAUST, because instruction will be in Arabic, Omair observed.

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¶16. (U) SRMC Pandith has cleared this message.
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